



Bristol Development Authority
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Bristol, CT 06010

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December 20, 2019

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Town and City Clerk
111 North Main St.
Bristol, CT 06010

At its special meeting of December 17, 2019, J.H. Sessions Building Task Force approved the following motion:

To recommend that the development team of BHA/Vesta JV be designated as the selected team for redevelopment of the J.H. Sessions property, and to forward such recommendation to the City Council for further action via formal report by the chair as supported by City staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Christine Cooper'.

Christine Cooper
Recording Secretary
Bristol Development Authority

cc: Justin Malley, Tom Conlin, Roger Rousseau, Marie O'Brien

J.H. Sessions & Sons Building Task Force: Recommendation on the Redevelopment of 273 Riverside Ave.

Executive Summary

The J.H. Sessions & Sons Building Task Force was appointed by the Mayor and approved by the City Council on September 10, 2019. The ad-hoc task force was charged with reviewing proposals from developers toward the resolution of Brownfield issues and redevelopment of the J.H. Sessions & Sons property. The 80,000 square-foot building sits on 3.54 acres at 273 Riverside Avenue and is in significant tax arrears. The City – in partnership with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the State Dept. of Economic & Community Development and the Connecticut Brownfield Land Bank – has worked for more than 15 years to assess environmental contamination on the site. The City's past environmental assessment work combined with the recent competitive bid seeking developers for the site are critical first steps to bringing the property back to productive use.

J.H. Sessions & Sons Building Background

In these last 15 years, the City, with U.S. EPA and State of Connecticut support, has undertaken several environmental site assessments at the former J.H. Sessions & Sons Factory. Riverside Avenue is an important gateway into Downtown Bristol, as well as a highly traveled segment of State Route 72. The Sessions Building, circa 1907, was the site of a trunk hardware manufacturing business in which various heavy metal compounds were used in the painting and plating operations. The building is eligible for State and Federal Historic Register listing.

Since the Sessions Company ceased operations in 1984, other industrial users (the largest were Armaloy and Plymouth Spring) have leased space in the building. More than 30 different tenant businesses have occupied space in the building since 1965. The building is still owned and operated by members of the Sessions family.

The most recent Phase III Assessment (Leggette, Brashears & Graham, 2017) concluded that remediation would include a combination of removal and encapsulation, with costs ranging up to \$1.4 million to comply with residential standards.

The City's interests in the Sessions property concern the public health and safety, as well as the recommendations of the [Route 72 Corridor Study](#) to "promote the adaptive re-use/redevelopment of vacant and/or underutilized properties, particularly Brownfield sites, especially along...Riverside Ave." The restoration of this magnificent building can be a catalyst for change along this stretch of Route 72, with an impact on positive economic development in Downtown Bristol. Additionally, the property has been in significant tax arrearage for years. It is time to see this and other vacant, rundown properties put to a higher and better use, back on the tax rolls, and benefiting the residents of the Riverside Corridor and the entire City.

Development Process

The City has not received property taxes for 273 Riverside Avenue for many years, with current tax arrearage close to \$1 million. The City holds authority to pursue tax foreclosure of tax-delinquent properties to recoup back taxes and to encourage new, responsible ownership. However, the legal

liability associated with this site as well as the costly environmental cleanup – coupled with the building's large size, financial obligations, and other complications – make a traditional tax foreclosure undesirable.

As a result, the City is working on an alternative path to development with the following steps: (1) Complete necessary environmental assessment to determine the cost of cleanup; (2) Solicit proposals from developers to identify a responsible new owner with a vision that aligns with the City's goals for the property and area; (3) Coordinate a "tri-party" agreement involving the City, the Connecticut Brownfield Land Bank, Inc., and a new owner/developer which allows the Land Bank to shoulder the environmental liabilities that the City cannot assume; (4) Pursue State and Federal grant funding to remediate environmental contamination while establishing environmental liability protections for the new owner/developer; and (5) Transfer a property free of environmental liability and appropriate for residential use to a new owner/developer to begin construction.

Connecticut Brownfield Land Bank, Inc.

The Land Bank proposes to be part of the solution to manage the cleanup, apply for liability relief, and help develop funding necessary for the site. Rather than enter the chain of custody for the property, the City prefers to have the property transferred from the current ownership to a new ownership, which would coordinate appropriate and beneficial reuse of the property. To achieve this outcome, the City is proposing to partner with the Connecticut Brownfield Land Bank, which will take possession of the property as legal and environmental issues are resolved. The land bank is a not-for-profit independent entity that would assist in the remediation of contaminants, transfer of property ownership, and subsequent redevelopment and occupancy/reuse.

Redevelopment Bid Process

The City developed a request for proposals to manage solicitations from interested developers. The document included general guidelines for submission of a proposal, but did not specifically identify reuse scenarios, other than making general reference to the City's current [Plan of Conservation and Development](#).

The City task force consisted of community members selected for a diversity of perspectives. Over the course of three months, the task force carefully reviewed the proposals as well as supplementary materials, and met with developers to better understand their findings. Considerations were given to each proposal's Brownfield cleanup strategy, the architectural/site specifics of the reuse plan, the residential modeling analysis by the firms, the budget model, the anticipated public contributions or incentives toward the budget model, and the post-development plans, as well as a number of other factors.

Task Force Analysis

Four developer submissions were received. All four centered primarily on housing, but paid attention to the significance of the building in Bristol's history, and to the importance of the surrounding environs.

The developer team of Vesta/BHA Joint Venture was selected because of its site design, attention to market demand and its financial model. Vesta/BHA Joint Venture has committed to a business plan

that allows a number of units in both the historic structure as well as new construction, warranting on-site management and services dedicated to current market rate apartment dwellers. The Task Force also confirmed that Vesta/BHA Joint Venture is committed to offering a rental community that is not subsidized, with rents that will reflect the market rate.

Vesta/BHA Joint Venture (please see conceptual images attached)

The Vesta/BHA Joint Venture proposal will transform the J.H. Sessions site from an underutilized and contaminated property into a vibrant apartment community offering modern living while paying homage to the site's rich history. The development will include 91 apartment units in total, divided between two separate buildings. The existing J.H. Sessions structure will be converted to 40 one-bedroom and 19 two-bedroom apartments. A new 45,000 square-foot structure will be added immediately east of the existing structure and will feature 6 one-bedroom and 26 two-bedroom units. The most historically significant elements of the existing J.H. Sessions structure will remain, including the impressive "U-shaped" main building. There will be demolition of certain areas of the structure shown to pose the most significant environmental challenges. In addition to streamlining environmental cleanup, this demolition will also serve to free up areas for vehicle parking and additional outdoor gathering space (described below). The look and feel of the new building will be carefully constructed to reflect the historic nature of the original structure.

Studies demonstrate that many of today's apartment renters desire unique, smaller living spaces with an abundance of communal gathering opportunities on-site. The Vesta/BHA Joint Venture proposal certainly fits this model. The apartments and living areas will be unique, with exposed brick, high wood plank ceilings, wide wood flooring, large and ornate windows, and more. These details will be found in the original 1907 structure and also will be duplicated in the new building envisioned for the site. Also included in the proposal is an abundance of community gathering space – including a library/computer room, a community room with kitchen facilities, and an expansive fitness facility. Outside, tenants will enjoy additional gathering spaces featuring barbeque grilling, fire pits, electric vehicle charging stations, and more. In addition to covering the 3.5 acre J.H. Sessions site, the project will include the 0.5 acre property at 296 Riverside Ave across the street. The majority of this area will be used for parking to support the apartment community but will include green space to complement the adjacent Pequabuck River and Veterans Memorial Boulevard Park.

The rent rates for all apartments will reflect market conditions and will not be subsidized. The project's price point and amenities will appeal to all ages – from young professionals to empty nesters.

The ownership and development team is highly accomplished, with many successful projects within their portfolios. Vesta Corporation is a distinguished owner, manager, and developer of apartment housing, having closed on over \$1 billion of financing for the development of more than 20,000 housing units in 13 states and the District of Columbia. While it operates across the country, Vesta's main office is in Connecticut, with over 1,500 Connecticut apartment units in its portfolio. BHA (Bristol Housing Authority) has a proven track record of successfully developing and managing housing in the area. This project will differ from other BHA projects, as it will be 100% market driven and will not be subsidized for lower-income earners. The project's construction partner – D'Amato Construction – is one of the most respected companies in Connecticut, delivering the finest product available. D'Amato's commitment to Bristol's future is evident in its partnership on this project.

Recommendation

The task force recommends that Vesta/BHA Joint Venture be selected as the developer and owner of the remediated Sessions building. The Vesta/BHA Joint Venture exhibits a multi-state track record of managing residential properties and a commitment to the long-term monitoring required on the property. The Vesta/BHA team has exhibited the best financial plan to achieve success at 273 Riverside Ave. The implementation of this plan can be transformational for the Riverside Avenue corridor and for the future of Bristol's downtown development.





CONCEPT SITE PLAN - ALTERNATIVE ENHANCED COMMUNITY SPACE

273 Riverside Avenue



GA+M *Vesta* **D'AMATO**
architecture